

Blessed Margaret of Castello, Part III: In the Garden of Gethsemane

This is the third in a series of talks about Bl. Margaret of Castello, delivered at the meeting of the Idaho Lay Dominicans, Bl. Margaret of Castello Chapter, at St. John's Cathedral in Boise, Idaho on Sunday, Jan 21, 2007. by Anita Moore, J.D., O.P.L.

Now the story of Blessed Margaret takes us into the 14th Century, when the City of God on earth and the City of Man were both simultaneously imbued with creative genius and wracked with tumult. Guillaume de Machaut, the most influential composer of his century, was born in 1300; his music, including his masterpiece, the *Mass of Our Lady*, is still performed today. Around 1308, Dante Alighieri began the *Divine Comedy*, in which his literary self, straying in sin, is sent on a pilgrimage to the abyss of Hell, up the Mountain of Purgatory, and finally into the highest Heaven. By the 14th Century, the English Language, molded and shaped by the Norman Conquest of 1066, begins to be recognizable to 21st-Century English speakers; Geoffrey Chaucer, the Father of English Literature and composer of *The Canterbury Tales*, was born in 1343. An anonymous contemporary of Chaucer's wrote the Middle English classics *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* toward the end of the century; around the same time, William Langland wrote *Piers Plowman*, telling of the search for the true Christian life. The Italian poet Petrarch, who perfected the sonnet, and who lived with one foot in the Middle Ages and the other in the Renaissance, was born in 1304.

But as in every age, art and culture walked hand in hand with hardship and misery: Famine, War, Pestilence and Death ran riot in the 14th Century. Between 1315 and 1317, the Great Famine swept over Europe, killing millions from Russia to Ireland, and from Scandinavia to the Alps. In 1337, Edward III of England laid claim to the throne of France, igniting the Hundred Years' War in which Joan of Arc would fight – a war that would actually go on for 116 years, and would in the meantime spawn the Peasant's Revolt in England in 1381. The Black Plague visited Europe for the first time in 1347, killing one-half to two-thirds of the population. The radical dislocations caused by all these disasters rang the curtain down on feudalism, upon which the social order had been founded for several hundred years.

And no amount of temporal hardships would be complete without a strong dose of spiritual upheaval. In the 1350s, the Lollard heresy arose in England, according to which it was believed, among other things, that pious laymen could celebrate the Sacraments, and that piety was the sole means of transmitting religious power and authority. The Fraticelli, a breakaway sect from the Franciscan Order and an early species of sedevacantists, had considerable influence in parts of Italy and Sicily in the 14th Century. Worst of all was the Great Schism of Western Christianity in 1378, ignited by the election of Pope Urban VI and the subsequent election of anti-popes, resulting in conflict among the civil authorities of many realms over whom to recognize as the legitimate Pope. This was preceded by the 69-year Avignon Papacy, which

began in 1309 when Pope Clement V – elected the year Margaret was released from her cell – moved the papal court from Rome to Avignon.

This was the world that Margaret ventured out into when, in 1305, a tidal wave of war loomed over Massa Trabaria, and her family fled with her to the castle at Mercatello. But for Margaret, this was not a flight to freedom; instead, it was a flight to an even more terrible captivity than the one she left. Keeping their deformed daughter out of sight was still the order of the day for Parisio and Emilia, so they put her in a dungeon. Margaret was used to being kept in a small space, and not being able to go outside or visit freely with others, and not being able to ward off heat or cold; and being blind, she was not oppressed by darkness. But at least in her old prison, she could hear Mass and receive her Sacraments, and she always had the company of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament just a few feet away. Here, even this was taken away from her. As she had told Fr. Capellano years earlier, she realized that she was being called to imitate Christ more closely through her suffering; now, deprived even of the Sacraments, she was plunged into the Agony of Gethsemane. Perhaps she cried out, as Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” Foretelling the coming of the Messiah, Isaiah said, “By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living...” (Isaiah 53:8) Now, Margaret too was really cut off out of the land of the living.

At long last, about a year later, Margaret would be released from prison – but release would not prove to be the end of her suffering. Word came to Margaret’s parents of miraculous cures taking place at the tomb of a Franciscan tertiary, Fra Giacomo, in the city of Castello. Here, perhaps, was the solution to their problems. Maybe God would at long last relieve them of their burden and cure Margaret. Indeed, He was bound to do so: if He was listening to the prayers of the rabble and the slaves that flocked to Fra Giacomo’s tomb, He could not fail to show His power at the behest of important people like them!

So at long last, Parisio and Emilia brought Margaret out of prison, and even treated her relatively kindly. Together they journeyed to Castello, and when they arrived at the tomb, thronged with the sick and infirm, Parisio instructed Margaret to pray as hard as she could to be cured of her lameness, her blindness and her deformities.

Always obedient, Margaret knelt and prayed for a cure. But Margaret did not subscribe to the name-it-and-claim-it brand of Christianity. She knew that God certainly could cure her; but He was under no obligation to do so, and certainly would not do so if it what she asked for was not for her good and His greater glory. In Chapter 4 of the Letter of James, the Apostle says, “You do not have, because you do not ask.” Like Parisio and Emilia, we tend to focus on this, and conclude that it follows that if we ask, we must automatically receive. But James goes on: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (James 4:2-3) Margaret understood this, just as she understood that her afflictions were her ladder to Heaven. So, although she obediently prayed for a cure, she added: Only if it be Your Will.

Margaret prayed all day for a cure, but to the consternation of her parents, nothing happened. Before we go on to judge Parisio and Emilia, though, we ought to pause and consider how often we have imitated them. How often do we pray for something, and then, when we don’t get

exactly what we want, when we want it, we just give up? Or, what's worse, how often do we get mad at God for not snapping to attention and delivering the goods? Only He sees all ends, and He wants what's best for us even more than we want it for ourselves. Just think how sorry we would be if we actually got everything we asked for!

None of this occurred to Parisio and Emilia as they looked in disgust at their still-uncured daughter. God had let them down. But, to their way of thinking, they had earned the relief they sought from their unspeakable burden, and they were going to have it, whatever God might have to say about it – assuming there even was a God. They turned and walked away from the tomb and out of Margaret's life – and out of all human knowledge. Nobody now knows what happened to them after this shameful deed, or whether, in the years that followed, they ever received word of their daughter; but since they had such a powerful intercessor with God, there are solid grounds to hope that they repented before they died. Perhaps they are still in Purgatory to this day.

As for Margaret, she lived out her Purgatory on earth as she listened in vain for the sound of her parents' voices and for their footsteps, waiting for them to return to her. She always knew that her parents did not love her; but when she made her way back to the inn where they had stayed and learned that they had abandoned her, she realized that they not only did not love her; they hated her. Like her Lord who prayed for His executioners from the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," Margaret repaid hatred with love, and outrage with forgiveness. She never spoke a harsh word about the parents who had deserted her; instead she went on loving them and praying for them – and turned her mind to the business of surviving. In short, she put into practice these words of the prophet Isaiah:

"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Isaiah 43:18-19)